

Polaris Translations



Tank Minus Three

Sukinasaki Saki's Unwarranted Substitute

1

Heya, good afternoon. It's been a month, hasn't it?

Eh? We saw each other just yesterday?

Did we really? I dunno about that.

Ahaha, when you've lived as long as I have, one day feels about as long as one month, you see. You'll have to give me a pass for a mistake at that level.

Your life will end up being rather lacking if you spend your whole life picking at other people's mistakes, you know—well, though I say that, you might be the kind of person that wants to do that, being such a contrarian and all.

Kumagawa-kun.

Kumagawa Misogi-kun.

The Minus that crawls from chaos, Kumagawa Misogi-kun.

Thinking about it, you've grown quite accustomed to this tagline, too—anyway, in accordance with my instructions as gamemaster, you've managed to brilliantly clear Stage 1 and obtain the "Hero's Sword", but of

course your battle has only just begun. We're really still only at the start.

You've heard from Utsubogi, right?

This game I've come up with, which I may as well call the Anshin'in Game, consists of four stages in total.

And for now, you've only cleared up to the very first stage—so good luck on the remaining three stages.

Ah, and I'll say this in advance, but this game has no overtime, no “world beyond the game's end”, so you can be at peace (since I'm Anshin'in-san).

Games these days have gotten quite large and grandiose, and, to put it poorly, way too swollen. So that's why, in times like these, I've made sure my game became nice and compact. I've folded it up rather neatly.

I wonder if acting contrarian like this is a personality trait that showed up from being sealed by your “Book Maker”? Or was it something that was within me all along? It's something to think about, isn't it.

Well, feel free to think about it as much as you'd like on your own, since I'll keep going.

Tomorrow—well, in terms of the date it's already today, but anyway—tomorrow, I'll have you go straight into challenging the second stage of this game.

Stage 2.

This matter has already been decided, so you have no right to refuse.

Well, you're free to refuse if you want to, but if you do that when you have no right to, then I'll throw a temper tantrum—if you're going to be mean and not play along with my game, then I'll mess you up.

Ah, but maybe I won't mess “you” up?

Surprisingly enough, perhaps a threat like this might work better on you right now—if I said that I'll “mess your friend up”.

Although it kind of just sounds like I'm saying, you can count on me to

mess your friend up.

Ahaha.

Don't make that face. Of course I'm joking.

Has there ever been a time when I wasn't joking?

And I don't even need to check with you to know that you wouldn't refuse to play a game with me—after all, it allows you to come into contact with me that much more, which is convenient for you in looking for my weak points.

Because that Utsubogi girl has such a strong loyalty towards me, she blindly said something like I “didn't have any weak points”, but of course I do have weak points—if I didn't, then I wouldn't have ended up being sealed by you.

For an omniscient, omnipotent being like me, omniscience and omnipotence comes with its own worries.

To be honest, from my perspective, the moment you were able to seal someone like me, someone who's lived for three trillion years—it almost makes me want to say that you “won” at that point. But if I said that, you probably wouldn't recognize your own victory.

You won't recognize your victory.

And you won't recognize your own worth.

You're really at the extreme end of an already-extreme defeatist philosophy—well, but even so, that way of thinking may actually be rather common in this day and age.

Being unable to see your own worth—no, “actively refusing to gain a sense of worth”. A way of thinking and a way of living where you don't really want power or influence.

Do you happen to know about a rule in evolutionary theory known as the “island rule”?

Well, there's no way someone like you would know.

Ahaha.

Don't worry, this kind and gentle Anshin'in-san will explain it to you—I'll show off how educated I am. Feel free to use me as a reference in your science class. As for the "island rule", it's a theory that suggests that there's a tendency for living beings to shrink in harsher living conditions.

What does that have to do with islands, you ask?

Basically, in restricted and isolated spaces like islands, it becomes less convenient to have a larger body, so the trend of "becoming smaller" gets prioritized in terms of evolution—although this is just in loose terms.

The smaller your body is, the less energy you need, which gives you an advantage in terms of your metabolism.

If we apply this to humans, then it's like saying that "strong" constitutions go along with the phrase, "the nail that sticks out gets hammered down"—and even before that, to "maintain" that "strength", an enormous amount of energy is required, whether it's through effort or something else.

If so, then people are better off just not having that strength.

Well, regardless of whether or not it's better, it's certainly easier.

Something as tiresome as "strength" can just be left for someone else to have—it implies that way of thinking, right? It's easy to understand if you think of strength as real estate. The larger your property is, the higher your taxes and maintenance costs are, and you'll only just barely be able to make a living—and so it feels like it'll be easier to rent a place or share with roommates.

What, it's not that difficult of a topic.

If you think of it like when you volunteer to be the class representative, but then the rest of the class wants to curb your actions—you can say that that's another example of the island rule, though it's a bit forced.

You define yourself as a Minus in self-deprecation and hide behind your modesty over and over again, refusing to claim the "victory" that you should have earned long ago.

And the reason you don't obtain it.

The reason you don't attain it.

It's that you greatly reject the idea of becoming "strong", of "winning"—that could be the reason, perhaps.

It really conforms to the current times.

I can even say it like that.

You may even be considered a hero of this new era—perhaps not an antihero, but a Minus-hero.

Oh, don't get all shy about it.

This is why it's so troublesome to deal with guys like you who aren't used to being praised—and it's even more troublesome if you think that I was praising you right now.

Incidentally, the island rule has a bias that goes in a different direction, too.

Beings that were already diminutive to begin with can conversely grow larger in size—I wonder if that means that, in contrast to "strong" things evolving to become "weaker", they're able to abandon their "weakness" in some way?

And I wonder if that day will come for you.

Although it will probably be far in the future.

Like, around when summer break is about to end, for example—oh, no, this is just something I said arbitrarily, not meant to be any sort of prediction. Of course, among the ten quadrillion Skills that I hold, I do have plenty of Skills that allow me to make predictions, but while I'm fine with using them to mess around, they aren't particularly Skills that I want to use straightforwardly.

Life is more fun when the future is unknown.

Well, even though I say life, I'm someone that's far beyond the concept of

simply living.

That's why I said something arbitrary like the end of summer break—if you just believe me like that, then I'll really be taken aback. After all, my plan for this game is to raise you into a "Hero", after all.

The Hero, Kumagawa Misogi.

That's what I want you to become.

You think it's impossible for you, right? That's right, it probably is impossible. But surprisingly, I'm the kind of person that likes to challenge the impossible.

Did you know that?

And, after I wasted your time with this meaningless chatter, it seems like the sun is about to rise—then, for my final words, I'll give you some important information. Hm? I should tell you something like that in the beginning? Hey, hey, if you don't let me put on airs and spout meaningless chatter, then all I'd have left would be my ten quadrillion skills and seven hundred million terminals.

Ahaha, it's fine even if that's all I had left?

You sure know what to say.

I wish you'd say those kinds of things more often.

Anyway, now that you've acquired the 'Hero's Sword', allow me to tell you the name of the next person you must visit.

Of course, she's another one of my terminals, and she's yet another first-year.

Class 1-3, seat number 31, Yakeishi Kushi.

However, unlike Teppou Uchi, who was a messenger, and unlike Utsubogi Mei, who was a facilitator, this girl's position is a little different, so be careful.

She's a Skill Holder.

Not to mention, it's not a Skill that I lent her, but a Skill inherent to her, an annihilation-type Skill Holder—if you think she'll be the same as those two cute girls from before, you'll be in for a hard time.

And that girl is the opponent that you must defeat—and yes, this time, she is very clearly an “opponent”. She's not here to be a guide or a facilitator. She's different from Teppou and Utsubogi in that sense as well.

It's not just that you have to defeat her, because from her end, she'll have the clear determination to come and defeat you, too.

Of course, this is a game.

In the end, we're just playing around. It's a magnificent farce, a show of make-believe.

If anything, it's just one of my flights of fancy—so I've made sure to prepare an opportunity for you to win.

And what is that opportunity?

Of course, it's the “Hero's Sword”.

I told you just the other day, right? What the name of that sword was.

You are to fight while wielding that sword—of course, after preparing that opportunity, after gallantly preparing that opportunity for your sake, I know very well that the closer you get to victory, the less sane you become.

I prepared an opportunity for you to win, despite the fact that you fear victory more than defeat—you could say it's my way of harassing you.

Now, Kumagawa-kun.

Will you embark upon your adventure with sword in hand and courage in your heart? It's an adventure of the highest quality, you know.

Embark, embark.

Although in your case, you'd probably think “embarrassing, embarrassing”^[?]—well, feel free to spend your life full of embarrassment and your adventure full of embarrassment however you want.

■ ■

My name is Sukinasaki Saki.

Class 3-4, seat number 2.

The Suisou Academy Student Council Executive Committee General Affairs Manager.

Allow me to summarize the events of the first volume, with passion.

It was just the other day that a mysterious transfer student named Kumagawa Misogi appeared in my class—and, in an instant, without any time to spare, in the very same day, he completely took control over Suisou Academy.

He eliminated the Student Council President, Jakago Aki, that had had the academy under her control up until then, and succeeded the position himself—of course, he didn't succeed the position of his own volition, as it had been me that encouraged him to do so, so it wasn't like I didn't have any responsibility for the current situation. But right now, for that reason, I had been pushed by him into becoming the General Affairs Manager of the Student Council Executive Committee.

Since then, as a member of this two-person Student Council, I quietly worked hard together with Kumagawa-kun at the Student Council duties, making me someone to be admired and pitied—or so it should have been. But this had been just three days ago.

Then, Kumagawa-kun suddenly asked me something like, 「Do you happen to know who seat number 18 in Class 2-3 is?」

As for who that was, it turned out to be the Marksmanship Club's ace, Teppou Uchi-san—and that question ended up becoming the start of this tale.

It seemed that this was a game that a person (?) named “Anshin'in-san” had challenged him to, and if he failed to win this game, Kumagawa-kun would be expelled from Suisou Academy.

Yes, he'd be expelled.

And though I'd thoughtlessly wanted to say that there was no event in the history of Suisou Academy that was more desirable than this, it would still be troublesome if he were to abandon his duties so soon after assuming the position of Student Council President.

And so—well, I had various other reasons for doing so, too—I did have just a little bit of an ulterior motive—although really, it was only a little—I ended up accompanying Kumagawa-kun in his conquest of the game. Or I was forced to accompany him.

Whether it was a game or a farce, it seemed like an impossible task in itself to make Kumagawa-kun win, like trying to get a monkey to evolve into a human in a single generation—but people had times when they had no choice but to fight, even when they knew they would lose.

In terms of *Kamen Rider Ryuki*.

Those who don't fight won't survive.

Well, in our case, we weren't guaranteed to survive even if we did fight—but anyway, the game had begun.

First was the tutorial, the Russian Roulette showdown with Teppou Uchi-san—well, it was supposed to be the tutorial, so it shouldn't have been a showdown at all, but putting that aside, he ended up playing a game of Russian Roulette in one of the school's classrooms.

A game of Russian Roulette tinged with the scent of blood and gunpowder.

And they didn't just use blanks, but actual, live ammunition—and by providing an answer to the absurd problem that Teppou-san put forth, Kumagawa-kun obtained a ticket to begin the real game.

The first stage of that game.

The quest: "Find the 'Hero's Sword'!"

It was a quest that involved looking for the "Hero's Sword" that had been hidden somewhere in Suisou Academy—and again, Kumagawa-kun

(while dying) managed to clear the second quest through a shortcut-like trick, a loophole-like method.

Incidentally, the “Hero’s Sword” itself had been hidden at the bottom of the academy’s pool, and the one who had been in charge of that was Class 1-3 seat number 23, Utsubogi Mei-san—due to the psychological scars she received during that time, she had ended up hospitalized.

Well.

You could say it was fortunate that she managed to escape death.

It actually seemed weirder for Teppou-san to be able to attend school normally, after having her brains blown in during Russian Roulette—well, in any case, having obtained the “Hero’s Sword” through a method that very much suited him, Kumagawa-kun was able to proceed to the second stage of the game.

And thus concludes this summary.

Eh?

There wasn’t actually that much passion in it?

Well, that was just something I wanted to try saying...

Anyway, it was the following day.

I’d come to school early to carry out my morning duties, but it seemed Kumagawa-kun had come even earlier, as I found him lying on the sofa of the Student Council office.

At first, I even wondered if he had died.

I’d nearly unconsciously shouted with glee at the idea, but unfortunately, er, excuse me, to my great relief, he was properly living and breathing.

He had stirred when I’d entered the office.

「Mm...」 he said, looking at me languidly.

Even if it hadn’t been me, and it had been some neighborhood dog that had entered the Student Council office, he surely would’ve had the same

reaction.

「Oh... It's just Hotarugawa-san.」

“And who in the world is that!? With such a stylish name like that.”

「.....」

I'd thought for sure that he'd just been joking as usual, so I'd simply retorted as usual, but Kumagawa-kun continued to look at me vacantly before speaking.

「Oh... It's just Saki-chan,」 he amended.

Had he really made a mistake...? Then really, who the heck was this Hotarugawa-san? Was it someone from one of the academies he'd crushed in the past? It was a name I'd never heard before, and I had no idea what could possibly have happened to such a person, but it truly made me want to offer up my condolences. Allow me to pray for your happiness in the next world.

「So you were alive, huh? That's great.」

“.....”

Apparently, I had been killed off in Kumagawa-kun's mind—I wonder, perhaps he'd established in his head that I'd been the one to drown in the pool instead?

What were you even thinking with respect to a person's life? Although he probably wasn't thinking anything.

However, all that aside, it didn't seem like Kumagawa-kun planned on waking up and getting out of that sofa any time soon—much like a corpse, he continued to lie on the sofa.

“...What? Are you having headaches again?”

「Yeah. It feels like someone's trying to spoon out my brains... If a cluster headache makes you want to commit suicide, then this is a headache that makes me want to commit murder.」

“And the cause for this is, once again, that person that appears in your

'dreams', that 'Anshin'in-san'?"

Kumagawa-kun had been suffering from headaches since yesterday—that's why he was in such poor condition. Kumagawa-kun being in poor condition was a situation that made me feel nothing but good, but the cause for it was indeed that "Anshin'in-san" that was running this game.

When someone kept appearing in your dreams and making snide remarks about you, it surely felt like being hit by plain and simple mental attacks—

"...But actually, isn't it possible that the real cause for your headaches are simply a lack of sleep?"

Although, if you were having a dream, then you were technically sleeping, so a lack of sleep probably wasn't the best way to describe it.

But if you're constantly having nightmares, then it may as well be the same thing.

[Yeah. Well, that could be it... They say your head starts hurting if you stay up all night, too... Aah, jeez, I'm really not in good shape right now. At this rate, people who start reading from the second volume will misunderstand that I'm some sort of gloomy character.]

"....."

Although I didn't think that Kumagawa-kun being a gloomy character was a misunderstanding or anything.

[I'd really better clear Anshin'in-san's Anshin'in Game quick, so that people realize that I'm a lively, vivacious, Oronamin C character. If I can clear this game, then the headaches will probably subside.]

"...Can't you just make your headache go away with 'All Fiction'?"

I just tried bringing it up for no particular reason, not really trying to make a point or retort to a joke, but at my words, Kumagawa-kun sat straight up and opened his eyes wide.

"Eh? What? What's wrong, Kumagawa-kun? What does that expression mean?"

[It's the expression of a pigeon that was just hit by a peashooter. It's the expression of, so there was a method like that!]

“.....”

[But still, that puts me in a tight spot. After all, I absolutely hate the idea of taking someone's advice, as much as a person hates snakes. If I wanted to go with something even worse than snakes, then I hate it as much as a person hates Kumagawa Misogi. If I were to do as you say and cure my headache with 'All Fiction', then I would be too ashamed to live. Why would you say something like that? If you thought of a method like that, then you should have secretly come up with a way to casually advise me so that I could think of it on my own.]

“What a difficult Student Council President to deal with...”

[But doesn't that make me cooler than a Student Council President that's easy to deal with?]

Kumagawa-kun grinned.

No, it wasn't cool at all.

[For example, something like this. 'Kumagawa-kun, what was it again? Um, you had that thing that starts with an “S”, that you write as “Lying something” and read as “something Fiction”, and it was a thing that starts with an “S” that could make “anything as if it never happened”, I think, and if you use that, wouldn't it be something if you could do something about that something that's hurting you?']

“What you're trying to say is really something.”

[Or you could've just censored it. 'Kumagawa-kun, if you use that XXXXX “XXX XXXXXXXX”, can't you make your XXXXXXXXX as if it XXXXX XXXXXXXX?']

“That sounds so indecent...”

What was he trying to make a girl say, this guy.

Kumagawa-kun really was of a different type than the former Student Council President, Jakago Aki-san—it's these kinds of situation where I

keenly feel that. Should I call it narrow-minded or what...? At least for Jakago-san, though she had a frighteningly powerful lust for domination, on the other hand, she had little resistance to taking in the opinions of those below her.

You could even say she was rather magnanimous.

Well, in that sense, it was just the flip side of her arrogance, where she treated any sort of advice from anyone as “having come up with it on her behalf”...

In Kumagawa-kun’s case, it didn’t seem like he’d say something like, “I would have thought of it eventually,” in regards to whatever advice he got.

[All right, I’ll do this. I’ll make it as if Saki-chan’s advice never happened, and say that I thought of it myself.]

“You’re going to go *that* far to preserve your dignity!?”

If you’re going to the trouble of making my words as if they “never happened”, then just quietly make your own headache as if it “never happened” instead!

[Tch.]

Full of discontent, Kumagawa-kun raised his hand to his own head.

[‘All Fiction’,] he said. [I’ve made my headache as if it never happened—yes, indeed, how very refreshing. It feels like I’ve just slept for 100 hours straight.]

“If you slept that long, wouldn’t that actually just make your head hurt...?”

[Saki-chan, you give good advice, don’t you? You’re a Good Advisor Sukinasaki.]

“Maybe you could be a little more twisted?”

[If you’re asking a twisted contrarian like me to twist even further, then that’s a crazy request. My spine will just twist right off.]

As he spoke, Kumagawa-kun stood from the sofa and moved over to the desk that had a nameplate labeled “President”—and as he took his seat,

he began working.

He sure had a meticulous, or just a serious, side of him, to be able to start his Student Council work as soon as his headache went away.

[All right, all right, thanks to you I'm in perfect condition. It feels like I just can't live anymore without you, now.]

"What's with that, suddenly? That's kind of disgusting..."

I ended up normally calling him disgusting.

Although he was disgusting in ways that weren't normal... I mean, although he was the Student Council President.

[Actually, even in this game from Anshin'in-san, I probably wouldn't have gotten this far if you weren't here, Saki-chan.]

"What are you saying, really? Kumagawa-kun, please stop joking around."

[No, no, even a person like me can get serious or not get serious once every thousand years or so.]

Once every thousand years... That was way too low a frequency.

And sometimes he didn't get serious, either.

[Even in Teppou-chan's Russian Roulette and Utsubogi-chan's swimming showdown, I definitely wouldn't have made it these two or three steps forward without you, Saki-chan. If it weren't for the perfect advice you gave... That is, your hints.]

"Well, I wasn't intentionally giving you hints... But if whatever I said ended up being a hint for you, then I feel like that's just a coincidence."

[Huhu,] said Kumagawa-kun, laughing off my statement.

His mentality was really hard to read.

Not that Kumagawa-kun had a "heart" or "logic" in the first place, most likely.^[?]

[Well, if you want to be modest, then go ahead—as for me, I'd like it if you would continue to support me with that in mind.]

“Continue to... Ah, you mean the second stage?”

[If that's what you want to think, then go ahead.]

“.....”

Why were you speaking in such a roundabout way?

That's where you just say “That's right”.

Of course, if I raised an objection there, then he'd just respond with “If that's what you want to think, then go ahead” again, so I quietly acquiesced and moved the conversation along.

I was the girl who quietly moved things along.

“Since you were able to clear the first stage, the first quest, there are only three stages left... right?”

[Right. According to what Anshin'in-san told me in my dream, there's absolutely no overtime.]

“I see...”

I didn't know how far you could believe the words of the gamemaster herself, but for now, I suppose we couldn't do anything but believe them. As players, it wasn't like we had any other information we could rely on.

[The first stage was a swimming showdown, so maybe the second stage will be a cycling showdown? I can get pretty boisterous when it comes to road racing, you know.]

“...No, you've gotta be kidding.”

Or rather, the first stage wasn't even a swimming showdown. As I mentioned before, the quest was to find the “Hero's Sword” that had been hidden at the bottom of a pool—why was he being so vague with his wording?

“That reminds me, Kumagawa-kun. What did you do with that 'Hero's

Sword'? I think you said something like, you wouldn't be able to take home something so long and conspicuous, so you were going to leave it in the Student Council office..."

As far as I could see, that unsheathed sword was nowhere to be seen in the office. Hmm, had he cleverly hidden it somewhere so that outsiders wouldn't find it? Above the ceiling, or perhaps, between the cushions of the sofa that he had just been lying in...

[Ah, it's in the cleaning supplies locker right now.]

"....."

How sloppy!

Praying on the possibility that Kumagawa-kun was just telling a joke, I flusteredly went to the locker (and it really was just a normal school locker, without any sort of lock), but when I opened it, the sword in question was right there, mixed among the brooms, mops, and dustpans.

Even my hope that he'd covered the blade by wrapping it with some cloth had instantly been dashed—it was a completely naked sword.

How should I put this?

It was kind of amazing how carelessly leaving such a dangerous weapon like this in such a place actually made it not seem dangerous at all.

Lined up with brooms like this, it almost looked like just another cleaning tool. It seemed like a convenient tool for scraping out things that were caught behind furniture.

"By the way, Kumagawa-kun. We've been calling it the 'Hero's Sword' this whole time, but does this sword have a formal name?"

[A formal name?]

"Yeah. No matter how I see it, the 'Hero's Sword' is just a nickname, right? There has to be a name like Excalibur, or Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi, or the Cursed Muramasa..."

[I dunno. Actually, I feel like Anshin'in-san told me something like that...

But I forgot. Ehehe.]

He laughed.

In my next life, I figured that reincarnating as Kumagawa-kun was the one thing I didn't want to happen, but I couldn't help but think, just a little bit, that it might actually be a pretty fun life to lead—although really, it was only a little.

Anyway, it seemed that it did have a formal name, but as long as Kumagawa-kun didn't remember it, we'd just have to keep calling it the "Hero's Sword".

"From what you understood, Kumagawa-kun, you thought that you'd have to exterminate something using this 'Hero's Sword', right? But since Utsubogi-san, the one in charge of the proceedings, ended up being hospitalized, we don't have any more hints for the next stage..."

[Good grief. To think that she would get a leg cramp and drown! What a pathetic Swim Club member.]

"I'm pretty sure she wasn't hospitalized because of that, though..."

[But there's no need to worry. Because Anshin'in-san properly followed up for me in regards to that. I've obtained the key to the next stage.]

"I see... So that 'Anshin'in-san' wasn't just appearing in your dreams to make you unreasonably suffer from headaches."

[Class 1-3, seat number 31,] said Kumagawa-kun. [Who's XXXXXXXX-san?]

"....."

No, really.

Why would you even censor that?

■ ■

Fortunately, as the information regarding the student's year, class, and

seat number had been disclosed without being censored, I'd been able to recall the name of that student.

Class 1-3, seat number 31.

Yakeishi Kushi.

She was the classmate of Utsubogi Mei, the Swim Club member who had been hospitalized due to Kumagawa-kun—she belonged to both the *Kendo* Club and the *Iaido* Club.

She was what you'd call a double club member (*kenbu*).

Well, in her case, you could probably call her a sword club member (*kenbu*) instead—and speaking of which, when we were looking for the “Hero's Sword” for the first stage, the first quest, the *Kendo* Club and the *Iaido* Club had been one of the places I'd suggested looking in.

“...I see, I see, so the opponent that you'll fight with a sword is going to also be a sword-user, too—or, wait, swords and katanas were different, right?”

[Eh? Is that true?]

Kumagawa-kun tilted his head.

I was pretty sure I gained that knowledge from Kumagawa-kun, though... Was he just living his life and chattering away that irresponsibly, this guy?

[I didn't know about a viewpoint like that. For swords and katanas, I didn't know about a viewpoint like that.]

“Eh? Were you perhaps making a pun on 'viewpoint (*kenkai*)' and 'sword (*ken*)', and 'didn't know (*shiranakatta naa*)' and 'katana'? Why would you go out of your way to make trouble for yourself like that?”

[Well, you see, if I keep going with gags that are absolutely hilarious, then that'll just become the new norm. Sometimes I just need to say something unfunny to set the rhythm. Even pitchers need to change it up sometimes, right? No matter how good a pitcher is, if he keeps pitching fastballs, then eventually the batter will get used to it.]

“I don’t think you generally had any gags that were hilarious, though... Normally everyone cringes at them, you know?”

Although, if it wasn’t funny gags but self-deprecating, surreal ones, then there was probably nobody better at that than Kumagawa-kun. Let’s just say that the one from earlier was just one of those surreal gags and move on.

“You’re the one who said otherwise, so if you’re going to say now that swords and katanas are the same, then I don’t really care... It just annoys me a little. Although really, it’s only a little.”

[So, what kind of girl is that Yakeishi-san? A regular player like Teppou-chan? Or a substitute player like Utsubogi-chan?]

“Um... Neither of those.”

[!?]

Kumagawa-kun’s expression was one of shock.

Um, you don’t have to be that surprised...

[Neither a regular nor a substitute player...? Who is this amazing enigma...?]

Kumagawa-kun continued with a serious tone of voice.

So that was how he was going to play it this time... No, well, I would have been fine playing along, but I honestly just wasn’t sure if we had the time for that.

Class might end up starting if I didn’t pay attention, and there was still work left to do. No matter how important this game run by “Anshin’in-san” was, it wasn’t a reason to abandon the responsibilities of the Student Council.

[Don’t tell me... She’s the advisor!?!]

“Close. She’s the manager.”

I gave him the correct answer before we could veer too far off topic.

He'd only had one chance to get the right answer.

"Yakeishi-san is the manager for the *Kendo* Club and the *laido* Club. In the first place—"

Ah, no.

It was probably better if I didn't say this.

"—Anyway, she's the manager."

[Manager...]

Kumagawa-kun repeated that job title himself, but said no more afterwards. Despite the fact that the correct answer had already been revealed, his face remained serious.

If he made a serious face here, then it almost made me think that he was serious—although I couldn't tell what was going on inside his head. I wouldn't be the least bit surprised if he was actually having perverted delusions with that serious face. Although I would hate it.

"Ah, Kumagawa-kun, are you perhaps the type of person that doesn't understand what a manager does? Someone who doesn't get what it means to support people that are working hard—someone who doesn't see the point of cheer squads or cheerleaders?"

[No, I surprisingly do have some appreciation for managers. After all, in my middle school years, I did have a close friend whose specialty was 'managing'.]

"....."

It must be a close friend from another one of his delusions.

How pitiful, for him to only grow close with people in his delusions...

[But, well, it's a bit unexpected. That the 'enemy' I'm supposed to fight using the sword I obtained in Stage 1 is not an athlete but a manager.]

"Ah... So that's what you meant."

[This isn't exactly what you were saying earlier, Saki-chan, but it doesn't

seem like the job of a manager to have a sword vs. katana showdown... If I appeared in front of her holding a double-edged sword, wouldn't I just meet the end of being reported to the police?]

"Ah... Well, you seem like you'll be reported to the police even if you don't do anything, so don't worry. And you seem like you'll meet your end even if you're not holding anything."

[What kind of follow-up is that?]

Kumagawa-kun seemed amazed.

However, as if he'd actually been pleased by the insult of "seeming like he'd meet his end even if he wasn't holding anything", he didn't voice any more doubts.

What a difficult person.

[Oh well,] said Kumagawa-kun. [In any case, just like before, I suppose I'll go to see her after school today—I wonder if it's fine to just go to the classroom of Class 1-3? Or should I visit one of the club rooms instead?]

"...No, Kumagawa-kun. Instead of just suddenly going to see her, you should make an appointment before going."

[An appointment?]

He looked at me blankly, as if he'd never heard the word for setting up a meeting between two people before.

[That triangular chocolate with a pink tip? It's really good, isn't it?]

"That's Apollo... If you're going to make that connection, then you should have just gone for Apollo 11 instead. Why did you go for the chocolate?"

[Because I like chocolate. I have some every day except for on February 14th.]

I could sense a hint of pride in the idea that he didn't eat any on February 14th—although it was a faint hint of pride that could blow away at any second.

And then, there was something that suddenly came to mind, so even if it had nothing to do with the main topic, I decided to bring it up out of curiosity.

“Hey, hey, Kumagawa-kun, Kumagawa-kun.”

[What is it, Saki-chan, Saki-chan?]

“You like chocolate, right?”

[That’s right.]

“Then, between ‘*Kinoko no Yama*’ and ‘*Takenoko no Sato*’, which one do you like more? Or rather, which side are you on?”

The war between the ‘*Kinoko no Yama*’ faction and ‘*Takenoko no Sato*’ faction, the two great leaders of the chocolate world, was widely known, but I was curious about what Kumagawa-kun’s opinion on this war was.

If anything, I would’ve thought that whichever Kumagawa-kun liked was the loser, but his answer was actually this.

[No, those two have to be bought in a set, right? You buy them in a set and mix them up before eating.]

“.....”

That was very much like Kumagawa-kun.

In the end, he was like a bat that went back and forth from the mountain to the village.

[Um, so, Saki-chan, you’re saying you’re going to buy some Apollo chocolates and *Kinoko no Yama* and *Takenoko no Sato* and *Kikori no Kirikabu* for me?]

“Of course not! Why did this turn into me becoming an errand girl buying snacks for you! And you added *Kikori no Kirikabu* to the list, too! I’m telling you to make an appointment with Yakeishi-san! And then make arrangements to meet her in a safe zone that isn’t the classroom or the clubroom or the dojo so that you don’t bother anyone else!”

[Oho, that’s an outstanding versatile performance you just showed,

Saki-chan—what, are you perhaps aiming for the role of the protagonist?]

“The role of the protagonist... I’m not aiming for it, and you’re not even a protagonist.”

[And why should I go to the trouble of doing that? It seems easier to do a surprise attack if I go and surprise her instead.]

“So the idea was to catch her in a surprise attack... You’re going to do a surprise attack with a sword that’s capable of drawing blood. No, as the General Affairs Manager of the Student Council, it’s obviously my duty to make the President’s work easier, and this will avoid any unnecessary conflicts, okay?”

[.....]

Kumagawa-kun paused meaningfully before nodding meaningfully.

[Haha,] he laughed. [It seems like you’re planning something, huh, Saki-chan?]

“P-planning? Uh...”

[It’s fine, I’ll leave it to you. Every person has a cool line that they dream of saying at least once in their life, but I never thought a Minus like me would get the chance to say this.]

Kumagawa-kun spoke without the slightest pause to his movements in his work.

[Do as you see fit.]

■ ■

And so I did.

Although, it was as I saw fit for me, not for Kumagawa-kun.

In any case, I made use of my lunch break to visit the classroom for Class

1-3. I planned on asking someone who was nearby to call out Yakeishi Kushi for me, but...

“Ah!”

That was what I heard.

Because while I’d been making that request near the entrance of the classroom, the girl in question, sitting at her seat within the classroom—noticed me first.

Yakeishi Kushi.

Noticed me.

“Isn’t that Sukinasaki-senpai! Eh! Huh! What is it, did you come to see me!?”

With almost a skip in her step, she rushed over to greet me—yes, that was Yakeishi Kushi. Actually, our relationship wasn’t even on the level that I’d refer to her that formally, as normally, I’d been calling her Kushi-chan for a long time.

“Kushi-chan, long time no see.”

“It really has been a long time, Sukinasaki-senpai! Ever since you joined the Student Council, it seemed like you’ve been really busy, so it was hard for me to call out to you, too.”

“Ahaha, sorry about that—um, do you have a moment? Maybe we can get lunch at the cafeteria together. There’s something I want to talk to you about.”

“I don’t mind. Ah, but give me a second.”

She jogged back to her seat and spoke to her classmate about something. It seemed she was canceling the plans she had for today’s lunch break—oops, it kind of felt like I jumped the line.

My apologies.

While it wasn’t my intention to get in between two classmates, because the situation was what it was, let’s just say I didn’t really have a choice.

Not to mention, Kushi-chan herself had a problem with her personality for being able to toss aside a promise with a classmate without even knowing the details of why I came, but I figured I'd talk to her about that another time.

"Sorry for the wait! Sukinasaki-senpai!"

And once again, she returned with a skip in her step.

Well, it didn't seem like she held any malice, and when she approached me so joyfully like this, I couldn't exactly feel bad about it.

Yakeishi Kushi.

Class 1-3, seat number 31.

Manager of both the *Kendo* Club and the *Iaido* Club.

And—my childhood friend.

She was two years younger than me, but she was taller than me—with straight, long, black hair, she looked like quite a Japanese beauty, but, well, having known her for quite a long time, I was well aware of that playful side of hers that belied her beauty.

But I hadn't known.

I had thought that I'd known everything about Kushi-chan, but I had had absolutely no idea about the fact that she was one of those terminals of "Anshin'in-san"—

"...I didn't know about this, but."

After arriving at the cafeteria, I ordered Lunch Set A, Kushi-chan followed suit by ordering the same thing, and we sat opposite each other at an empty table. Then, I got straight to the point.

It had been a long time since I'd last talked to her, and normally if things were calmer, I would've chatted with Kushi-chan about various things like our recent happenings before moving onto the main topic, but with what was "happening" currently, I felt like I couldn't proceed so leisurely.

Well, even if it weren't the case, in terms of my recent happenings, I was

mostly just flung about at Kumagawa-kun's discretion, and that wasn't something I wanted to happily discuss with my friends.

So I went right to the main topic.

"Kushi-chan, you're a terminal for 'Anshin'in-san'?"

"That's right. Huh, did I never tell you?"

Kushi-chan responded immediately.

What's with that easygoing nature?

Was this information only on that level?

"Ah, wait, uh-oh, was this supposed to be kept a secret? Oopsie-daisy—teehee."

It seemed she'd thought the same thing I had—although it was way too carefree of a reaction if she really had thought the same thing.

It didn't even seem like she was going to pause eating her meal.

Since she was a member of a sports club, she ate quite heartily—wait, no, Kushi-chan was just a manager, though.

For now—she was just a manager, though.

"Ah, I see, Sukinasaki-senpai. Right now, you're working with Kumagawa Misogi, aren't you? That's why you know about Anshin'in-san."

"Yeah... Something like that."

I wanted to complain that calling it "working with Kumagawa-kun" sounded like an extremely poor description, but to be fair I couldn't deny that that was the case, so I swallowed my words of discontent.

"Then, Sukinasaki-senpai, do you know that I'll probably have to face off against Kumagawa Misogi today?"

"Yeah... Or rather, I came to see you in order to make an appointment for that."

“Eh?”

Kushi-chan didn't hide her surprise.

It was now that she stopped eating.

“Tch... Kumagawa, you bastard, you're using Sukinasaki-senpai as your errand girl, is that it?”

“Bastard?”

“Ah, no, um... Kumagawa Misogi.”

It was too late to change her words. And even if she did, it was without honorifics... Ah, shoot, I messed up the order of things. If the reason I came to see her after such a long time was assumed to be “Kumagawa-kun told me to come make an appointment”, then of course Kushi-chan would get angry.

I hadn't come because Kumagawa-kun had told me to, either... Rather, Kumagawa-kun had even thought that we shouldn't even bother making an appointment.

But even if I tried to explain that, by now Kushi-chan probably wouldn't accept it—despite her cheerful demeanor, she was surprisingly stubborn in her misconceptions.

“Um, so, Kushi-chan—I haven't exactly heard the full details from Kumagawa-kun, and I don't really know anything about Anshin'in-san, either, but—”

“Eh? You don't know? Then let me tell you!”

Kushi-chan leaned forward in excitement as she said that.

I was grateful for that offer of information, but those loose lips of hers were a little scary. And, whatever kind of person this “Anshin'in-san” was, she probably wouldn't have entrusted any important information to this loose-lipped girl... Kushi-chan, despite her appearance, had a lot of careless points to her.

“Well, then, you can tell me all about it some other time. Later, okay? The

most pressing matter right now is the fact that you and Kumagawa-kun need to face off against each other—”

“That’s right, and I definitely won’t lose!”

“Um, no, it’s not a matter of winning or losing,” I said. “Please run away right now.”

“.....”

“Did you not hear me? Kushi-chan. You need to run away right now. Run away, without going to any of your afternoon classes. No, it might even be better to leave this school altogether. It was over the moment Kumagawa-kun set his sights on you, so it might be better if you fled to the other side of the Earth, or no, if possible, fled to Mars.”

“Mars... Um, that’s impossible, though.”

For a moment, Kushi-chan looked more frightened than bewildered at my threatening attitude, but she soon spoke, raising her voice as if she’d gotten angry.

“Wha, what are you saying, Sukinasaki-senpai? Are you saying that I’m going to lose to Kumagawa Misogi?”

“No, no, like I said, it’s not a matter of winning or losing, Kushi-chan. If you two fight, then you’ll obviously end up being the winner, and that’s definitely a given, close to a 100 percent chance of winning, but regardless of whether you win or lose, once you get involved with Kumagawa-kun, I’m warning you that you’re absolutely going to be in for a rough time.”

“.....”

“They say a meeting by chance is preordained, but in Kumagawa-kun’s case that chance meeting will cause you major harm. Once you get involved, it’s over.”

“Then, then are you saying it’s all over for you, Sukinasaki-senpai...?”

Since I insisted upon it so strongly, Kushi-chan recoiled once more. Well, this wasn’t unreasonable, not for Kushi-chan—in fact, I’d never insisted

upon anything so strongly in front of anyone like this before.

“That’s right. It’s all over for me.”

Uwaah.

After saying it for myself, it was kind of an incredible line.

But regardless of how it sounded, the actual meaning of that line was not mistaken—in most cases, it had been “over” for most people as soon as they’d gotten involved with Kumagawa-kun.

“Kushi-chan, I figure you must already know, being a terminal of that ‘Anshin’in-san’ and all... So I wasn’t sure if I even needed to say this.”

Mm, actually.

Kumagawa-kun had said that there were seven hundred million terminals or so—of course, that had to be just another one of Kumagawa-kun’s exaggerations, but still, it meant that there had to be quite a number of people for that to be simply an exaggeration and not just a lie.

If so, even if they were part of a large-scale organization, it wasn’t necessarily the case that terminals frequently linked up and made contact—thinking as such, I hesitantly brought up the names of Teppou Uchi-san and Utsubogi Mei-san.

“Ah, I know about those two,” said Kushi-chan.

However, it seemed that she only knew Teppou-san as the worldwide ace of the Marksmanship Club, and Utsubogi-san as one of her classmates, and it didn’t seem like she knew either of them as another one of Anshin’in-san’s terminals.

“I even went swimming at the public pool once with Utsubogi. We even had a race, but I couldn’t win at all... Ah, but even so, I’m pretty good at swimming! As for Teppou-senpai... Well, she’s famous for being a weirdo, that’s for sure.”

“.....”

Well, that was probably true.

This wasn't the time to celebrate, even if my guess had been correct—after all, if she knew about the tragic fate that the aforementioned two terminals had “encountered” after getting involved with Kumagawa-kun, she wouldn't be cheerfully waiting for her battle against him like this.

I bluntly explained what sort of tragic fate had befallen Teppou-san and Utsubogi-san.

“...What, how awful... Eh? Then, should I just call the police instead?”

Kushi-chan said something rather decent.

It was quite the proper reaction to have.

Even I wanted to advise her to call the police, but, well, aside from that, it was clear that I couldn't allow such a proper girl to meet with Kumagawa-kun, and that I couldn't allow her to meet any misfortune. I renewed my resolve.

“Can't you talk to Anshin'in-san and ask to change places with someone else? There have to be other terminals at this school, right?”

“Yes... As far as I'm aware, at least five of them...”

“Five...”

That was less than I expected.

If we added Teppou-san, Utsubogi-san, and Kushi-chan to those five, then there were only eight terminals of “Anshin'in-san” at Suisou Academy... Well, there probably weren't just eight of them. I could only think that there had to be more.

However, even if there were only five, that was plenty of people to find a substitute.

“Then, you really should talk to Anshin'in-san...”

“Eeh... That's, well, it's a little... I'm a little reluctant to do that...”

Kushi-chan was being evasive.

Seeing that reaction, it sounded less like she was just reluctant and more

like it was just physically impossible for her.

“? What? Is 'Anshin'in-san' that scary of a person? Is she someone that doesn't allow any objections or mistakes, and you just have to shut up and deal with it?”

Of course, the image that had come to mind was, of course, of the former Student Council President, Jakago Aki-san—she'd been quite a beautiful yet relentless queen—but Kushi-chan shook her head.

“Anshin'in-san is a very generous person... If you're asking what she allows and doesn't allow, then she pretty much allows everything. You could say she's someone who would bet her life on how much a person can stay alive while living halfheartedly...”

“.....”

That was conversely still pretty scary.

Betting your life on how much a person can stay alive living halfheartedly, sounded a lot like the current Student Council President, Kumagawa-kun, though.

“Ah, that's right—right now, Anshin'in-san has become the same as that Kumagawa Misogi right now.”

“Eh?”

“Ah, no, that's not really relevant here—and Anshin'in-san was always that kind of person. Anyway, Sukinasaki-senpai. I just wanted to correct one thing. I'm... This probably goes for Teppou-senpai and Usubogi, too, since they're also terminals, but... We're not really Anshin'in-san's underlings at all.”

Kushi-chan's tone of voice felt awfully definitive. It was as if it was the one thing she wouldn't concede, even to her childhood friend and senpai.

“If anything, we're the same as Anshin'in-san herself—each of us is basically the very same person as Anshin'in-san. We're not underlings or subordinates or grunts or anything—we're identical.”

Actually, rather than identical, we're equal—said Kushi-chan

meaningfully. Well, in the end, it felt like absolutely nothing was explained, so if you just stopped there, then it made it harder for me to press further.

Well, there'll probably be another opportunity to ask her later.

For now, in the bit of time left in our lunch break, I needed to think about what I could do to keep Kushi-chan as far away from Kumagawa-kun as possible—at the very least.

"If you're identical or equal, then doesn't that just make it easier to rely on her? Just pass on the role to someone else—"

"No, like I'm saying, it's *because* we're identical and equal. If I passed on my role to somebody else, and that terminal ended up meeting the same fate, then it's basically the same as me meeting the same fate—taking the logic to its extreme, as soon as Teppou-senpai and Utsubogi met that fate, it was essentially the same as me having met that same fate."

".....?"

It was too hard to understand. I didn't get what she was saying.

It was like a Zen dialogue.

Well, if I were to forcibly interpret it in a way I could understand, then she was probably saying that even if someone else took her place in this situation, it wasn't the same as avoiding that terrible fate—the meaning had changed quite a bit, but if I interpreted it like that, it made more sense to me, at least.

Even if they were all terminals, putting aside Utsubogi-san, it's a little hard to think that Teppou-san would think the same way with that personality of hers...

"Then, what can we do... I personally just don't want to see my cute childhood friend become a sacrifice to Kumagawa-kun..."

"A sacrifice... It's almost like he's some kind of Demon Lord."

"Mmm."

Rather than a Demon Lord.

What he had in his hands was the “Hero’s Sword”, though.

So you’d be the one playing the role of the Demon Lord here.

“Um... I haven’t exactly heard any specific details from Anshin’in-san, but what kind of a person is Kumagawa Misogi, exactly?”

“? What do you mean, what kind of person?”

“Well, I... All I know about him is that he’s that damned enemy and that managed to seal Anshin’in-san as well as a damned defeatist, but still—”

Is that so.

Managed to seal Anshin’in-san...?

Ah, he’d said something like that at the pool, too...

Although, Kumagawa Misogi’s characteristic Skill “All Fiction” didn’t seem like a Skill particularly suited for sealing, though—but anyway, it seemed like aggressively calling Kumagawa-kun a “bastard” earlier arose as a result of the emotions and bias regarding that.

Following along with Kushi-chan’s words earlier, it was basically as if she herself had been sealed, though—

“...But what do you mean, ‘but still’?”

“Ah, well, among my classmates there are a few that see Kumagawa Misogi as a hero, you see. Since he managed to depose Former President Jakago, who once ruled over Suisou Academy—they’re all certain that he’s the one that saved them.”

“.....”

That’s quite the favorable impression they had of him.

But huh, so there was something like that.

If you only took what you saw on the surface, then that’s exactly what he had done—he’d overthrown the dictator.

Of course, for those that were a little closer to the heart of the matter—for example, for his classmates in Class 3-4 that knew him directly, they'd be well aware of Kumagawa-kun's atypical and overloaded nature. But for the students in different years, who'd never met him directly, the name Kumagawa Misogi could be reverberating as some form of heroic address.

As someone who was probably suffering from his damages from the position nearest him, it was something I was reluctant to accept—not to mention, I was the holder of the belief that, compared to the Kumagawa administration, the Jakago administration did a better job of keeping the peace, which meant that it was harder to accept the idea. But, at the same time, it couldn't be helped.

In the end, people could only interpret the world in ways that were convenient to themselves—it was only in the case that 'convenient interpretations lead to inconvenient circumstances' that they threw out their wishful thinking.

Like when Teppou-san had underestimated Kumagawa-kun.

Like when Utsubogi-san believed she was safe from Kumagawa-kun because she was merely the facilitator—those “interpretations” were probably the same.

Even Kushi-chan's classmates that saw Kumagawa-kun as a hero would probably change their minds as soon as they met him face-to-face—although, there wasn't really any reason to dispel the good images that people had of Kumagawa-kun.

“...Nonetheless, it's not as if Kumagawa-kun is unconditionally a bad person. Since the principles behind his actions are all over the place, there's the off chance, a one-in-a-million probability, that his actions will coincidentally line up with doing a good deed.”

“That's an awful way of putting it... Or rather, doesn't that just mean you hate him, Sukinasaki-senpai?”

“Well, I'm not going to deny it. Ah, no, I mean... Well, that's just something I've ended up thinking about.”

“Eh?”

“That is, where to draw the line between good deeds and evil deeds—Kumagawa-kun mixes it up on purpose, but normally people can’t handle such chaos. They end up categorizing others into ‘good people’ and ‘bad people’ on their own terms—but really, it ends up not mattering whether ‘that person’ is good or bad.”

“Not mattering... And, what do you mean by that, Sukinasaki-senpai?”

“For example, if a bad guy came up with some money-making scheme, but that ended up helping out a lot of people, then you could almost say it was a good deed—even Jakago-san had a lot of problems with her personality, but it’s a fact that she tried to preserve the peace in the entirety of the school.”

“.....? What are you trying to say, Sukinasaki-senpai? Are you saying that, in the end, Kumagawa Misogi is a good person that performs good deeds?”

“What, of course not, something like that is just impossible.”

I completely denied it.

If Kumagawa-kun was a good person, then evil couldn’t exist in this world—or rather, even a rock on the side of a road might end up being considered a good person. Besides “good”, the definition of “person” might even change.

“It feels like I’m starting to understand a little about what you’re trying to say, though, Sukinasaki-senpai... However, Anshin’in-san would probably respond to that question with something like this. Good and evil, good people and evil people, good deeds and evil deeds—all of them are perfectly equal.”

“.....”

What a dangerous way of thinking.

It was something only someone outside of humanity could think.

“If so, instead of getting someone to take your place, why not just blow off

this promise entirely? Just go home early for today.”

Let’s just say that fleeing to the other side of the Earth or even to Mars was impossible—even so, there was still the option to avoid the encounter with Kumagawa-kun, at least.

“I’ll just say something clever to Kumagawa-kun.”

“You’ll say something clever... That just sounds like you’re just going to tide him over temporarily.”

“Well, personally, I do just want to tide him over at first. ...Can you tell me, Kushi-chan? Has 'Anshin'in-san' told you what kind of game she has planned?”

“Um...”

Kushi-chan seemed rather wary.

It seemed she actually had some resistance to talking about Anshin'in-san's specific plans—well, of course, even if I was her childhood friend, I was still the General Affairs Manager of the Student Council Executive Committee, which meant that I was subordinate to the Student Council President, Kumagawa-kun. If she revealed a summary of the game to me, it wasn't any different from leaking confidential information to the enemy.

But it seemed that she was going to tell me in the end—it must have gotten through to Kushi-chan that I wanted to protect her at all costs.

Well, that was definitely part of it.

However, after hearing what she had to say, it seemed like that wasn't all of it—in the first place, it seemed that, after receiving orders from this “Anshin'in-san”, Kushi-chan began to harbor some doubts about the game after all.

She'd energetically declared “I definitely won't lose!” in the beginning, but it seemed that had just been false energy, with her putting on airs in front of her childhood friend and senpai—to put it bluntly.

“I just don't understand the orders I received!”

That was what she'd said.

"Don't understand? What do you mean?"

"I mean, the plans themselves, I understand just fine... She wasn't keeping anything secret from me. Kumagawa Misogi was going to wield the 'Hero's Sword' and come to visit me, so I was to defeat him in a one-on-one battle—that was the general idea of it."

"....."

I see.

Well, just as expected, although I hadn't exactly expected the specific details of it—at the very least, the plans weren't anything that made me surprised to hear. I could even say it was a proper duel, a proper game.

"And then, if I won, then that was fine, and if I lost, then I was to guide him to the next stage—"

"The next stage..."

In other words, the third stage.

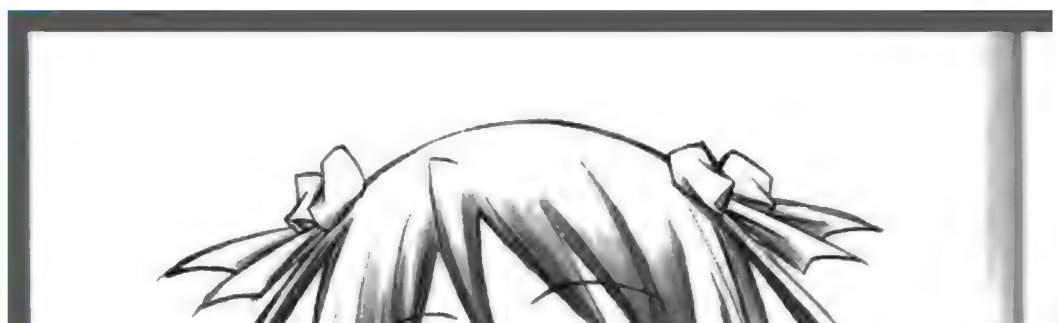
This was also a pre-established harmony—there was nothing surprising about it.

"...But still, it's definitely weird."

Kushi-chan spoke.

She spoke with a troubled expression.

"Because—*no matter how you look at it, I'm definitely not suited for this job.*"





2

Heya, Kumagawa-kun, didja die again?

Although I would prefer it if you could stop dying in ways unrelated to the game and unintended by me.

It's like you're a player in a soccer game, trying to see how many goals, or rather how many suicide goals, you can make within the time limit.

By the way, it seems like nowadays, the media is avoiding the use of the

term “suicide goal”. They consolidated it with the term “own goal”, it seems. Because using the word “suicide” isn’t exactly ethical, or however they put it—and they’ve replaced the term “sudden death” with “V goal” for similar reasons. Hahaha, the number of words we’re allowed to use in this world are slowly dwindling away, aren’t they. No, it’s not just words—it’s the way of the world to make dangerous actions and sociopathic expressions disappear from center stage.

Wholesomeness has no limits.

Being born in a world that’s like a glass house is in itself pretty interesting, isn’t it? Although, from my point of view, this and that are just equivalent things.

Anyway, even though I compared you to suicide points, it’s not like you particularly committed suicide this time—but even though you had no intention of dying, good grief, you’re just like Mario with infinite lives.

In the first place, even if you got infinite lives as Mario or as Luigi, you’re someone that still wouldn’t be able to defeat Bowser—but still, since you ended up dying anyway, I’d better think of something to ramble on about.

Let’s see, what should I talk about?

If you keep dying on me like this, if you get used to dying like this, then it feels like I’ll end up running out of topics to talk about—it feels like I’ll become a barren wasteland. But I know, since swords are the main topic this time, I’ll amuse myself with an episode about one.

The Sword of Damocles.

Do you know about it?

Of course there’s no way you’d know, Kumagawa-kun—but it’s a story about the throne of an old tyrant named Dionysius.

Eh? This has nothing to do with a sword?

Ah, well, the story is about a throne, but it’s also about a sword.

There was a man named Damocles that envied the tyrant named Dionysius that sat on that throne, so Dionysius said to him, “In that case,

why don't you try sitting in my seat?"—being told that, Damocles looked above the throne.

And there, from a thin string, a sword dangled above.

He had no way of knowing when that sword would fall onto his head—that was what it meant to sit in the seat of a ruler, was what Dionysius was pointing out to Damocles.

A fisherman on a boat might say something like "Hell is just one plank away", but in this case, it's more like "a sword is just six feet above you"—well, sitting on a throne means to sit above other people, so the moral of the story here is that sitting above others has its own dangers.

Now, Kumagawa-kun, what do you think of this story?

Hm? Eh? Is that so? Ahaha.

Well, of course, that's true, if you're asking why the story is called the "Sword of Damocles" and not the "Sword of Dionysius", then that's a pretty good point. And if you want to go even further and ask why it's not called the "Seat of Dionysius", then that's even more of a good point.

It's such a good point that I have no words to respond with.

Well, however, retorting like that is a bit unsophisticated.

At least make a comment about the story itself.

Although, what I think is that the tyrant Dionysius didn't do anything particularly exceptional, extraordinary, or even strange.

No, no, that is, of course it's not a particularly sane act to put a dangle a sword over the seat that you're sitting in, but what I think is that you can't even begin to rule if you aren't already in that mindset.

And he's equal to me.

The idea that people can stand above others is a bit contradictory, but from a more human standpoint, the idea that "Heaven does not create one man above or below another" is mostly incorrect.

Or is it correct?

Because the only thing that makes humans stand above or below another human... is humans, after all. Ahaha, I wonder if that ended up being a bit too satirical for you?

But really, my intention was never to talk about something so extreme.

I simply wanted to give you a word of advice.

Right now, you're working as the Student Council President of Suisou Academy—that's the position you hold. Perhaps you yourself would modestly spin that as being no more than the representative of a single academy, but still, it's true that you're standing above others.

You could say that the seat of the Student Council President is a throne.

A throne—a king's seat.

I told you before, right? That what I fear is Suisou Academy becoming a comfortable place for you to stay—I said that the thought of it makes me shiver.

But rather than a comfortable place to stay.

I was worried that the seat of Suisou Academy's Student Council President would become a comfortable place to sit in—huhu, if that ended up being the case, then I'd be happy for you, but at the same time, it would make me quite sad.

Because in that seat, eventually, a sword will fall onto you from right above you—or wait, it's possible that it won't come from right above you.

It could be from right behind you.

Or even from right next to you.

That would certainly be a rather Kumagawa-kun-like way to die, or perhaps a way to wither—for someone like you who enjoys betraying others, you'll someday be betrayed yourself and tumble from that throne.

Perhaps I shouldn't say betrayed, but backstabbed?

As long as it's a sword being used.

And if you're thinking that, because you have "All Fiction", it doesn't matter if you get betrayed and killed, then of course that's not too much of a problem, but even so, I want to warn you that you're making a big mistake—even an infinite-lives Mario will run out someday.

And that's it.

You understand after hearing me speak, right?

The reason I gave the "Hero's Sword" the name, "Misogimaru"^[?]—it kind of sounds more like the name of a ship than the name of a sword, but this is supposed to remind you of the Sword of Damocles.

The "Hero's Sword".

"Misogimaru".

Who will be the one to be cut down by this sword, to have their self diminished? Will it be my terminal, Yakeishi Kushi? Or will it be you yourself?

Or perhaps, actually—

■ ■

After school, when I returned to the Student Council office, Kumagawa-kun was dead.

"He died again...!"

Kumagawa-kun was lying face-up on the floor.

The "Hero's Sword"—it apparently had a name, but Kumagawa-kun had forgotten it—had pierced through his chest and even into the floor, making him look like some insect mounted on a needle in some insect collection.

Well, it was hard to say whether the insects in insect collections could be described as being mounted face up or face down... Anyway, he'd quite blatantly died, in a way much like what you'd see in a police drama.

It almost made me want to get some chalk from a classroom somewhere and trace along the edges of his corpse—ah, no, even if the target was Kumagawa Misogi, it would still be a bit imprudent to do.

Closing the door behind me, I approached Kumagawa-kun's corpse, and—though I didn't know if it was the right thing to do—grabbed the hilt of the sword in my hands and pulled it out in one go.

Splurt, went the blood that flowed out in one go.

It seemed that the sword had quite perfectly been impaled into his heart somewhere around the aorta, as I ended up showering in a powerful fountain of blood—of course, that had to mean that pulling out the sword was not the right thing to do.

It was like in police dramas where the knife was stopping the bleeding... I'd doubted the authenticity of that idea in the past, but after getting to experience it in reality, it seemed that such things really did occur.

[Don't just say, 'such things really did occur',] said Kumagawa-kun, getting up. As if it were completely normal. [You make it sound like it's somebody else's problem, Saki-chan.]

"Ah, Kumagawa-kun. You came back to life."

[You sure are awful to pull out the sword even if there was no guarantee of me reviving—you've gotten way too used to bathing in blood, haven't you? Good grief.]

Kumagawa-kun patted himself and his uniform down to fix things up—that is, he returned everything to as it was using "All Fiction". As a result, the hole in his body and the hole in his uniform closed up just like that.

The blood that colored my entire body also disappeared.

Seeing it again, it really was absurd, or even like cheating... It was a frightening Skill that made it seem almost obvious for Former President Jakago to have been chased out.

The Skill that couldn't be undone, "All Fiction".

I didn't think that I particularly wanted it, though...

"I definitely can't allow this Kumagawa-kun to meet Kushi-chan..."

[Hmm? Did you say something, Saki-chan?]

"Ah, no... Or rather, Kumagawa-kun. Why did you die? Did you get killed by someone? Perhaps, by that 'Anshin'in-san'..."

[No way, no way, something like that is impossible. Well, I skipped class because it was boring, and came to the Student Council office to read old issues of Weekly Shonen Jump...]

"....."

Skipping class because it was boring?

This Student Council President has some pretty straightforward principles.

[When I read Jump from ten weeks or so before, it feels good because it's like it's stimulating my memories, you see. It's a pleasant feeling, to remember things that you've vaguely forgotten. It's a kind of ecstasy that I doubt people with good memory can get to taste.]

"Uh-huh... So, what happened? Did you get killed by Jump?"

[Don't be silly! Weekly Shonen Jump is a wholesome magazine. It wouldn't do anything like kill people. To sympathize with people instead of killing them, that's Weekly Shonen Jump's slogan.]

"I thought it was 'Friendship, Effort, Victory'...?"

[Anyway, I was reading old issues of Weekly Shonen Jump when suddenly, for no reason at all, I felt like examining the 'Hero's Sword' that I'd stored in the cleaning supplies locker. You know, since after school today, Yakeishi-chan and I are going to murder the heck out of each other, right?]

"....."

[I thought that I'd better prepare for that—it would be unbearable if it ended up breaking or becoming dull when I finally used it. You know, like

a gunman that doesn't regularly overhaul his guns.]

It was quite a splendid idea to have, but why was it a gunman and not, say, a master fencer? The subtle weirdness of his sense was one cause for Kumagawa-kun's unpleasantness, I'd have to say.

[So, I thought I'd test out the sword on my own body, but I accidentally messed up and stabbed myself instead. I only planned on giving myself a little cut, but I was so surprised at how much it hurt that, while rolling around and writhing in pain, the sword ended up sinking deep into my body—ahaha, I would have died if you didn't show up, Saki-chan.]

"No, I think you did in fact die, even if I showed up... If you keep dying in happy-go-lucky ways like that, aren't you going to forget the joys of living?"

[Ahaha. I've never known the joys of living from the very beginning, after all. If only Anshin'in-san weren't there, I'd die as many times as needed.]

"Again, I really can't tell how much of that is actually true..."

In any case, I took the sword that had been impaled into Kumagawa-kun's heart (without even needing to wipe it down, Kumagawa-kun's blood on the sword had been made as if it 'never existed') and put it back in the locker.

I did it as if that's where it usually belonged... But if we kept treating it so crudely like this, then the sword really would become dull, but for now, considering how Kumagawa-kun had lost his life to this accident, it seemed that it was plenty sharp enough to cut down a person.

"...Although, I'd heard that Western swords like this one weren't guaranteed to all be as sharp as this."

This was yet another difference between a sword and a katana, and when it came to something refined for the sole purpose of sharpness, then there was nothing in the world that was better than Japanese katanas, and Japanese katanas were blades specialized in not just "cutting" but "eradicating", and stuff like that—although, these bits of trivia surely had a lot of nationalism embedded in it, so I couldn't take them at

face value.

[That's right. But we can never be too cautious, Saki-chan.]

"Eh? Cautious? What for?"

[Hey, now, what are you doing, playing dumb like that? For Yakeishi-chan, who's in both the *Kendo* Club and the *Iaido* Club, the blades she uses are not Western swords but Japanese katanas, right?]

"Ah..."

It wasn't like I'd been playing dumb, but the conversation had ended up making its way in that direction. It didn't seem like I had a choice, or rather I couldn't lie about it here, so I just said, "Y-yeah," nodding.

"They're katanas, all right."

[As for me, I would've also liked to swing around a katana which I'm more familiar with—well, if you don't consider the aesthetics, then it might be easier to kill a person with a Western sword than a Japanese katana.]

"? Is that so?"

I'll just ignore the remark about being more familiar with katanas as more of his usual nonsense.

[Well, I'm just speaking in terms of the image it has, not with any sort of specific data. It's just that, since katanas are curved, it seems harder to use than Western swords, which are straight...]

I see.

It wasn't an unconditional rule and just his own personal view, but even so, I did understand where he was coming from.

"They say that the spear far surpasses the sword in terms of weapons, too—was it an episode about Oda Nobunaga? The one who prepared bamboo swords to use against swords—"

[And the fact that that Oda Nobunaga-san ended up finally arriving at firearms makes for a rather interesting metaphor. Or, rather than a

metaphor, maybe a lesson. Not the Sword of Damocles, but the Gun of Nobunaga. When it comes to weapons, the one with the longest range is the strongest—and that could apply not just to weapons, but to Skills, as well.]

“Skills...”

Indeed, though it wasn't on the level of a weakness, if Kumagawa-kun's “All Fiction” had an opening that could be prodded at, it would be the range that it could operate at.

After all, when it came to the “Hero's Sword” that was at the bottom of the pool, his Skill's effect couldn't reach it from afar—although, if “Anshin'in-san” hadn't set up that extra rule, then he could've easily just made the pool itself as if it “never existed”...

[Like this, it really makes me realize how amazing the Skill of our former Student Council President, our golden-age Student Council President, Jakago Aki, was^[?]—that is, the Skill, 'Aero Biker'. The range at which she could use her Skill covered the entire grounds of Suisou Academy, right?]

“Um, yeah... That's what made her the ruler among the rulers.”

Well, it wasn't like she was actually called the golden-age Student Council or anything... I would prefer if he could stop giving people names on his own. Though she'd accomplished a lot, she was unfortunately being hospitalized at the moment.

[If we turn that around, you could say that she was a ruler precisely because of the territory she ruled over... Huhuhu. I really am not suited for this, am I?]

“? Not suited for what?”

[For Student Council President, you see.]

Kumagawa-kun responded immediately.

[It's something that you urged me to do, but the concept of ruling really doesn't fit my nature—my nature is really more like that of an underling, I'd say. Although I do think that, if I could lie back and live cockily like

Jakago-san did, it could actually be pretty fun.]

“It’s not...”

It’s not like that, was what I wanted to say, but I couldn’t even flatter him with those empty words.

After all, it *was* like that.

I would hate it if someone told me this to pin the blame on me, but I was in fact the reason why Kumagawa-kun was sitting in the seat of the Student Council President, and yet not even I believed that he was particularly suitable for the position of Student Council President—overall, it was strange to apply the word “suitable” to Kumagawa-kun at all, wasn’t it?

After all, what could possibly “suit” him, and what could possibly be “right” for him?^[?]

If anything, rather than being suitable (*tekisei*), Kumagawa-kun was more hostile (*tekisei*)—in the first place.

As far as I could tell, Kumagawa-kun was lacking something far more than suitability—and that was a lust for power. Despite being someone who “stood above others”, the lust for power that he should naturally have was rather flimsy for him.

It was possible that this could be absolutely normal for him—for a person like Kumagawa-kun, this could be absolutely normal for him.

The word for ruling, despite its undeniable negative image, was written with the *kanji* for “support” and “distribution”—in that sense, a ruler could be someone who “distributed their support” to their subjects, making it tinged with a sense of devotion.

For Jakago-san, the former ruler of this academy, she certainly was one that “distributed her support”—surprisingly, she showed quite the devotion to the academy.

As for Kumagawa-kun, he was quite lacking in that attitude.

When it came to the desire to devote himself to this academy, then he

had absolutely none of it—although, considering he had only just transferred in, it might be even more absurd if he did hold any feelings of affection for the academy. But Kumagawa-kun would probably never understand something like my feelings of desire to keep this academy at peace.

"Kumagawa-kun, hey, Kumagawa-kun. I asked you this before, but... What exactly is the reason you're playing along with this game run by 'Anshin'in-san'? Even if you're going to be expelled from the academy if you don't, it's not like you have any particular reason to stick to Suisou Academy, right?"

[I may not have any reason to stick to here, but I don't have any reason to *not* stick to here, right? Did you forget, Saki-chan? That I'm pretty whimsical, and a bit of a contrarian.]

"Well, of course I know that... I do know that you're whimsical and a contrarian and someone who's hated."

[I didn't say I was hated.]

"Even so, let's say you happen to clear all the stages for this game. You don't gain anything from it, though, do you? Although, it's a given that you won't be chased out or expelled from the academy, but..."

[Unfortunately, I'm not exactly good with calculating my profits and losses. I just like doing things that aren't worth it.]

"....."

Well, I knew that too.

I did—know that, but...

[What is it, Saki-chan, or actually, Saki-tan. You're getting quite involved in my affairs today, aren't you?]

"Please don't call me Saki-tan."

[What's up? Did you, perhaps, fail to make an appointment with Yakeishi-chan, so you're just trying to smooth things over now? Do you want me to give up on this game?]

“Ah...”

It was so close, and yet, so far.

As always, his intuition was good in a way that betrayed all logic.

It wasn't as if Kumagawa-kun had particularly good grades, but surprisingly enough, it seemed like he'd be able to get full marks when faced with a multiple-choice test. Although, it seemed equally likely that he'd be one row off for every question when filling in his answers on the answer sheet...

“I-it's not like that, Kumagawa-kun. I did properly make the appointment. I'm the Good Appointmentmaker Sukinasaki.”

[Appointmentmaker...?]

At the word that I'd just made up on the spot, Kumagawa-kun made a dubious face—it actually made me feel rather embarrassed to have Kumagawa-kun respond with such a plain reaction.

“But, um,” I said, trying to smooth things over. “How should I put this? Kumagawa-kun, even if you keep challenging this game following what 'Anshin'in-san' is telling you, in the end, aren't you just dancing on the palm of her hand? That was what I was thinking for a little bit. Really, it was only a little.”

[.....? What do you mean?]

“Um, so I'm saying—by now, you've cleared Stage 1 and are planning on challenging Stage 2, but if you keep following the system as it is now, I'm wondering if that doesn't just turn you into a loser anyway.”

[In other words, it's like saying that buying a lottery ticket is like buying a dream, but as soon as you try to buy dreams with money, you turn into a loser at life. Is it something like that?]

“No...”

I shook my head, but if you took the lottery to be a simple gamble, then it was possible that that comparison was actually rather pertinent. During the incident with Teppou-san's Russian Roulette, the topic of casino

roulette had come up, but when it came to gambling, in the end, it's the house that makes the most profit.

Gambles were not something to participate in, but something to organize—and when organizing (*moukeru*) leads to making profits (*moukeru*), that's what makes a gamble, and that's what makes a game.

“The idea of trying to make money through gambling is wrong from the beginning. Gambling is more like a game where you pay money to satisfy that desire to take risks, I'd say—when it comes to the lottery, you could say you've reached your goal as soon as you buy the ticket. However, Kumagawa-kun, it's not like you're particularly enjoying this game run by Anshin'in-san, right?”

「That's true. Well, if anything, I keep suffering from headaches and sleep deprivation, so it's more like being tortured... Hm? Then, Saki-chan, you really are recommending that I just give up on this game?»

“Um...”

I ended up letting out a slight moan. That wasn't necessarily what I was trying to get at—my true intentions, in the end, were just to somehow avoid a confrontation between Kushi-chan and Kumagawa-kun.

However, the position I was taking outwardly wasn't exactly complete nonsense or lies—after all, if Kumagawa-kun continued to clear the stages set out for him, then he'd completely be dancing on the palm of the hand of this “Anshin'in-san”, and I didn't expect that doing so would end very well.

Giving up on the game was certainly “in” in terms of reasonable options, though... However, as long as there weren't any options prepared for *after* he gave up, then it wasn't something I would really recommend.

Well, basically, I was pretty hard-pressed for options at this point—I held onto the slightest hope that Kumagawa-kun himself would shift his actions into giving up on the game of his own accord, but unfortunately, things did not end up proceeding towards that development.

Even though he was normally someone that would give up on anything... Though I felt that kind of irritation, I knew it was just me venting my anger.

“Well, there’s certainly still the option to give up on the game, Kumagawa-kun.”

[Hmm... But even so, since the Good Appointmenter Sukinasaki did go out of her way to make this appointment for me, I can’t just quit now. I would absolutely like to keep my showdown with Yakeishi-chan. I really do wanna have this showdown, and I really do wanna finish it off.]

“.....”

Don’t tell me he already knew?

About the fact that Kushi-chan was my childhood friend.

[So, Saki-chan. Where can I go to meet this Yakeishi-chan—Yakeishi Kushi-chan? No matter what game is in store for me, there’s a good chance that, like with Teppou-chan and Utsubogi-chan, there’ll be a time limit that ends with school closing, so tell me already.]

“Ah, that’s... Um, I did make the arrangement, but, just as you expected, it seems like it’ll be a showdown that involves using that ‘Hero’s Sword’.”

[I see. Then it’s a good thing I tried testing out how sharp it was.]

Did this guy have no hesitation in cutting down a person...? Even more so when the opponent was a girl. That simplistic personality of him wasn’t just dangerous, it was perilous.

[So, where will it be? Where is it, where is it? Where do I need to go to cut Yakeishi-chan into pieces? To stab a bunch of holes in her? To drench her in blood?]

“Um...”

I wish he’d just get a heart attack and die right here and now.

[Would it be the *kendo* dojo? Then I’d need to put out an order to halt the *Kendo Club*’s activities immediately.]

“Ah, you don’t need to do that.”

If the story had proceeded normally, then this would probably have been the case, but I’d managed to twist things so that it wasn’t necessary—I

didn't want to repeat the mistake of putting out an order to halt the Swim Club activities to search the pool yesterday.

「Then, the *iaido* dojo? Ah, but do the *Kendo* Club and the *iaido* Club even have different places for their practices? What they're doing is mostly the same, though—」

“No, no, this is the true ability of the Good Appointmentner Sukinasaki, you see. I've properly set the location, as well. She's agreed to wait for you on the roof of the school building—that is.”

I looked at the clock on the wall.

“At around 3:40 p.m.”

「3:40...? Hold on, even if there's going to be a time limit, isn't that way too early for this? It's 3:30 right now, then what? We'd need to move out right away. Appointmentner, you haven't considered my plans at all! Give me a break. I need to finish all my work and head to the roof in ten minutes? That seems a little impossible.」

“Eh? Is that so?” I said, pretending to be surprised. “S-sorry, Kumagawa-kun, I wasn't thinking. As an apology, I'll do all that work for you, so Kumagawa-kun, why don't you go on ahead by yourself?”

「As an apology? Then, if you would show me your panties, Saki-chan, then that would be an even better apology.」

“What kind of an apology is that...”

「Mmm...」

Kumagawa-kun gave a pensive look—and this would be where my fate diverged. Or rather, it was Kushi-chan's fate... If Kumagawa-kun forced me to accompany him in the end, then the “alternate plan” that I'd come up with to protect Kushi-chan would be rendered unusable.

I felt my heart beating in my chest as I waited for Kumagawa-kun's answer—and finally.

「Well, all right,」 he said, standing up. 「I have a pathological distaste for pushing my own work onto someone else... I feverishly hate it, but,

well, I guess it's fine if I have Saki-chan do it. So I'll leave it to you.]

"Uh, yeah. Understood. Leave it to me."

Even as I jumped for joy inside, I did my best to nod with as meek a face as I could. I did my best to pretend that I really was sorry for making a mistake with the booking.

[So, by the rooftop, which one did you mean? And what's the best way to get there?]

"Um..."

Since he'd only just transferred in and didn't have a grasp of the geography and layout of the academy, I gave him the directions to reach the rooftop.

I was acting like a navigation system, but actually, I chose not to tell him the shortest route—as if there was a bug in the navigation program, I intentionally taught him a route that took a lot of detours.

And, of course, I did it all so that he wouldn't notice.

Kumagawa-kun accepted my directions without question, as if he were a kid that did not know the meaning of doubt—I felt a sense of guilt at watching this situation unfold, but I knew that, if the game proceeded as usual, he would end up putting Kushi-chan through the wringer, so my sense of guilt wasn't that bad in comparison.

[I see, I see. Got it, I've perfectly understood the route I need to take to reach that rooftop. There's no one who understands this route more than I do. All right, then, good luck with the rest, Saki-chan.]

"Y-yeah. I'll follow after you as soon as I'm done with work."

[See ya!]

And Kumagawa-kun, spinning the "Hero's Sword" around in his hands, left the Student Council office—he was treating an unsheathed sword as if it were an umbrella (although you weren't supposed to spin umbrellas around, either), so I prayed that no unrelated students would fall victim to him...

Well, I wasn't exactly all-powerful enough to deal with every possibility—I wasn't omniscient or omnipotent. At the very least, I would try my best to protect Kushi-chan.

I had to.

I watched as Kumagawa-kun disappeared—as he turned the corner in the hallway—and then I closed the door to the Student Council office and locked it. Well, Kumagawa-kun had already proved in the case with Teppou-san that locks were meaningless to him, but this was just for my own peace of mind. They say that faith can even make a sardine's head sacred—although this was a bit different.

But in any case.

Locking the door in order to change clothes from here on out was just the etiquette of a proper lady.

■ ■

I'd harshly told off Kumagawa-kun for dancing on the palm of the hand of this "Anshin'in-san", but even as I spouted off those words of criticism, I myself was perhaps dancing on the palm of her hand as well.

Or rather, it was surely true.

Surprisingly, perhaps the entire world was dancing on the palm of her hand—her fingerprints and handprints becoming its contours.

"Because—no matter how you look at it, I'm definitely not suited for this job."

That's what Kushi-chan told me in the cafeteria.

"....."

"As you're well aware, Sukinasaki-senpai, I'm just a manager... I'm not sure what to do if I'm told to fight with a blade. Although, those were my

orders, so I will if I'm told to do so, but..."

"But, even so," I said. "It's not like you're a complete novice, right? With swords... Or I guess, with katanas, I'd heard you were rated pretty highly at using them."

"My area of expertise... Or at least, my specialty, just has to do with practicing *kata*, you see. They gave me the rather grandiose name of 'Sword Dancer', but it's just ironically derived from those *kata* movements. Of course... As for the point of whether I'm used to wielding or swinging one, then I definitely wouldn't lose to a complete novice, but..."

"....."

A novice... Speaking only in those terms, Kumagawa-kun would certainly be categorized as a novice. There was nothing he excelled at, and even if there were something he excelled at then it would only be excelling at harassing others. But if it was a matter of being a novice or an expert, then Kumagawa-kun had to be the former.

However, that novice was one that could even make experts turn tail and run from him—it kind of felt like being told that "scorpions were biologically related to spiders", but even so, I could only say that scorpions were just scorpions.

"Wield and swing around a blade... And was there a blade prepared?"

"Yes. To pair with the 'Hero's Sword' that Kumagawa Misogi obtained in the first stage, Anshin'in-san handed over an item known as the 'Fool's Katana'—um, I haven't brought it with me, and it's been stored in the club room for now."

It's not like I could just store a weapon like that in a classroom locker, said Kushi-chan.

As someone who knew a Student Council President that did in fact just store a weapon like that in the Student Council office locker, it was hard to simply agree with that.

"The 'Fool's Katana'... Is that going to be a Japanese katana?"

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“Is it unsheathed? Or did it come with a scabbard?”

This may have sounded like a rather strange question to her.

But the “Hero’s Sword” that Kumagawa-kun held was unsheathed, so that katana—rather than pairing with it, it seemed more like it was backwards compatible—I’d wondered if that “Fool’s Katana” could also be unsheathed, but this was apparently a bit of a forced interpretation, as the answer was that it obviously did have a scabbard.

Well, of course.

After all, it had been a blade given to Kushi-chan, who was a practitioner of *iaido*, so for the sake of being able to draw the sword from the scabbard, it was necessary for the sword to come as a set with the scabbard... Well, in that respect, it did feel like a small allowance given by “Anshin’in-san”.

“Then, a sword vs. katana showdown will be put into practice...”

“No, well, it’ll definitely be put into practice, and I said all that earlier, but honestly, I don’t have much confidence that I can win. Ah, but, as one of Anshin’in-san’s terminals, it’s not good to say that I don’t have much confidence... But it’s true that this battle isn’t exactly suited for me. I’m not a combat-oriented character, you see.”

“A combat-oriented character...?”

What would something like that be? A “character” like Teppou-san, for example? It was true that she seemed rather belligerent, and she’d challenged Kumagawa-kun when it wasn’t even needed—she had quite the rough time as a result, though.

“Yes, she might have been *better off if she’d simply fallen to ruin*... That’s why I can’t help but feel a sense of discomfort that I was selected for this, despite my character... Of course, if Kumagawa Misogi really is the defeatist that he professes to be, if he really is a Minus born under a losing star that knows nothing of victory, then I’d probably be able to win either way, but... In that sense, the outcome wouldn’t change no matter who was deployed as long as they had the motivation, which makes me

think that it's kind of a halfhearted strategy that's being taken."

"A strategy... I wonder about that. From the point of view of this 'Anshin'in-san', she considers herself not a player but the gamemaster, so she might think that she doesn't need a strategy... Or wait."

At that moment, after hearing what Kushi-chan had to say, I'd finally thought of something in that direction for the first time—yes, the idea that using the terms game and gamemaster was nothing more than a metaphor.

I'd been utterly deceived by those words.

And the idea that, in the end, this was only a showdown between Kumagawa-kun and "Anshin'in-san"—but didn't that mean that, if Kumagawa-kun continued to follow along with the rules set by "Anshin'in-san", then he pretty much had no chance of winning?

Because I was thinking like that, it obviously ended up seeming like I was trying to persuade Kumagawa-kun to give up on the game.

Well, that came later on.

But at this point, hearing what Kushi-chan had to say up until now, I made up my mind and spoke. No, I probably didn't even have the time to make up my mind. I spoke reflexively, almost as soon as I'd thought of it.

And just so there are no misunderstandings, I'd like to say that doing anything reflexively, as soon as I thought of it, was something that was extremely rare for me.

"Hey, Kushi-chan. You're saying that you're not particularly eager to take on that job, right?"

"Yes... Well, I do plan on going, though? Since I was ordered to... So I don't think it's a matter of whether it's good or bad, although, if I had to say it, then I'm not particularly eager to do it."

"And, if possible, you'd prefer not to do it?"

"Well, like I said, I do plan on... Well, to be honest, I would prefer if I didn't have to do it. But I can't just have another terminal take my place. I

told you earlier—and on top of that, I really shouldn't skip out on my duty itself. If I don't do it myself, then it'll just end up with someone else having to do it—of course, if that happens, then it's possible that someone more suited to this job will be picked, but there's no guarantee that that'll happen.”

“Right, I got all that. You can't just pass off your role to another terminal, right? Then, if you spin that around, it's okay to pass off your role to someone who *isn't* a terminal, right? In that case.”

I took a breath, and then spoke.

“I'll be the one to take your place.”

...And with that, I found myself changing my clothes in the Student Council office—from my school uniform to the *iaido* uniform that Kushi-chan had lent me. I didn't really know the specifics of Japanese clothing, so it ended up taking longer than I had expected.

As for the “Fool's Katana”, Kushi-chan had recovered it in advance and stored it in a place that was on the way to the rooftop, so there were no problems there.

And there was one final *trump card* that I prepared... Well, I'd pray that things would end before I needed to use it.

“I need to hurry... No matter how roundabout a route I gave to Kumagawa-kun, at this rate he's definitely going to arrive earlier.”

Although, when it came to a duel in swordplay, there was an excuse I could make for a bit of lateness—I could just assert that it was the tactics of the master swordsman, Miyamoto Musashi.

At the showdown that occurred on Ganryuu-jima, he'd employed psychological warfare by doing things like arriving late and saying things like, “Throwing away your scabbard means you don't intend to sheathe your sword again, so you're declaring your loss,” to Sasaki Kojirou, who had thrown his scabbard to the side. Miyamoto Musashi had plenty of

those episodes. Even though he had his famous dual-wielding swordsmanship, if you only listened to stories like that, then Miyamoto Musashi seemed like a rather unprecedented person.

Anyway, I finished changing my clothes and left the Student Council office—and naturally, without taking the roundabout route that I told to Kumagawa-kun, I took a shortcut that was unmistakably the shortest path to the rooftop.

And, when I arrived at the entrance to the rooftop in question, I paused. Suisou Academy's rooftops weren't particularly left open to students, so the door had naturally been locked, but at the moment, the lock had naturally been destroyed with a screw stuck in it. Well, this was within my expectations, so I couldn't complain... It was just a matter of taking from the Student Council budget to pay for the repairs.

I hid my presence as best as I could and looked through the window on the door to take a peek at the rooftop.

Considering how the lock had been destroyed, it was just a matter of course that Kumagawa-kun was there—he was standing around the center of the rooftop, doing some practice swings with the “Hero's Sword”.

He was swinging around a double-edged sword, its sharpness having been confirmed, with a smile on his face—really, looking at him from a distance objectively like this, it really felt like it wasn't an exaggeration that this was quite a dangerous character...

It really made me want to make a report on my cell phone.

To somewhere other than the police.

“Um...”

Kushi-chan had said that she was just a manager who specialized in *kata* movements with no actual fighting experience, so she was troubled if she was made to take part in a sword fight... But in that case, it wasn't like Kumagawa-kun had any knowledge in swordplay, either, so why was he so full of enthusiasm... He truly was a novice that could shame experts.

And, at the same time I started to admire him from afar.

[Ah.]

Kumagawa-kun's hand slipped as he was doing another practice swing, and the sword fell from his hands, so he was still pretty sloppy in the end...

Well, anyone would hate to fight something like that, not just Kushi-chan, and that went for me as well. But for the sake of my one and only childhood friend that I could speak my mind to, I had no choice.

As I tested the weight of the "Fool's Katana" that I had picked up along the way, I prepared myself to cross swords with Kumagawa-kun using this katana.

Incidentally, if she happened to win this battle, then my childhood friend was supposed to be gifted with the "Fool's Katana" as well as the "Hero's Sword" by "Anshin'in-san"—it seemed like it would make for a rather lovely dual-wielding swordsmanship in my imagination, but it wouldn't come to pass.

How did it come to this... That was what I couldn't help but think, but the ship had already sailed—sometimes you just had to resign yourself to things.

Although, it wasn't like I could take Kushi-chan's place just by wearing clothes used for *iaido*—it wasn't like I could pass myself off as her identical twin sister.

And so, I wore a mask.

I had decided to wear a mask before appearing in front of Kumagawa-kun, like something out of *Momotarou-zamurai*—since I didn't have much time, I could only get my hands on a plastic anime mask meant for kids, the kind they sold at festival stalls (I borrowed it from a classmate in the Manga Society without giving any reasons), but as long as my face was hidden, it would be fine. Kushi-chan would have to go down in Kumagawa-kun's memory as a mysterious high school girl that normally went about wearing an anime mask, but I suppose nothing else could be done.

As for my tone of voice, there were no problems there.

Of course, I wasn't some manga character that could change my voice freely to whatever I wanted, but I normally lived my life wearing an allergy mask—which meant that my voice was always muffled. So if I tried speaking without the mask, my voice would surely sound different from normal. And on top of that, if I wore that anime mask, then my voice would become muffled in a different way—well, even so, it would probably be better to speak as little as possible.

And so, after having explained this much, the rest should be self-explanatory—this was my strategy. Ah, well, it was a bit too crude of a "stopgap measure" to be called a strategy, but this was the plan I'd thought of.

In front of Kumagawa-kun, who apparently had no other ideas than to keep making practice swings, I'd disguise (?) myself and appear, not as Sukinasaki Saki, but as Yakeishi Kushi—and, after giving my name, we'd commence the battle.

The "Hero's Sword" vs. the "Fool's Katana".

Of course, I had no intention of trying to win. I was going to throw the match and lose to Kumagawa-kun at an appropriate time—even if it was intentional, it was a bit of an unreasonable demand to lose to Kumagawa-kun, but I had no choice but to pull out a loss through my determination. Although, putting in the effort to lose seemed unusually receptive towards Kumagawa-kun, as if he were a subordinate that I was making considerations for.

As for what was to happen when I lost, I'd heard from Kushi-chan—I was simply supposed to tell Kumagawa-kun the name of the terminal he was to meet next.

Eh? Are you telling me that that kid was a terminal, too? That was my reaction when I'd heard who the guard for the third stage was, but anyway, at that point, I would hand over the "Fool's Katana" as a reward item—Kumagawa-kun would then go and challenge the third stage, dual-wielding both the "Hero's Sword" and the "Fool's Katana".

Kumagawa Misogi's dual-wielding style.

It felt like that would also make for a good picture.

In the end, I was going to execute the tasks set for Kushi-chan as a proxy—it was some high-pressure work to take over both Kumagawa-kun's job and Kushi-chan's job, but I'll just resign myself to this fate.

I would become Kushi-chan's substitute.

The big difference was that, unlike Kushi-chan, it was fine for me to lose on purpose. Well, on that note, I was sure that Kushi-chan could have easily done so as well (not taking into account any psychological circumstances), but the point was that I understood Kumagawa-kun better than she did.

If Kushi-chan went and challenged Kumagawa-kun without prior knowledge, then she would be guaranteed to have a hard time, but if it was me... I'd probably be able to get by with about half the damage (I hoped).

And that was just until I could use my *trump card* at the critical moment.

Although, from a practical standpoint, for someone of Kushi-chan's caliber, I was probably worrying a little too much in terms of just the battle itself—though she'd modestly stated that she only knew *kata* movements, just that much wouldn't be enough to give her the grandiose name of "Sword Dancer".

I wouldn't have meddled so much in these affairs, either, had the opponent not been Kumagawa Misogi—for most other opponents, she would probably have completed her role brilliantly.

However, this was Kumagawa-kun.

If we were talking about "stopgap measures", then Kushi-chan could probably have come up with a stopgap measure herself—but what was really annoying in Kumagawa-kun's case was, and this was a pretty worthless way to phrase it, that "he dealt back everything he received".

To give an example, when he quarreled with Former President Jakago, she could certainly have been considered a favorite to win—and yet, the result was that she was the one to have been forced out of the academy.

Kushi-chan's understanding of Kumagawa-kun as a "guy that was always losing" was correct, but if I were to add one more thing, it would be that he was a "guy that was always losing, but kept going until he won"—and, on top of that, he would continue to lose perpetually anyway, which made him all the more frightening.

In other words, if it's a matter of unambiguously winning or losing, then you'd probably win against him at first, but after that, Kumagawa-kun will continue to stick to you and follow you around—and I couldn't allow Kushi-chan to be driven into such a harsh environment.

This was as someone who was already being followed around by Kumagawa-kun—because I had tactlessly gotten involved with him, been appointed as the General Affairs Manager, and basically treated as subservient to him, this was what I greatly thought. And this may also sound like a worthless thing to say, but I didn't want Kushi-chan to have a tough time like me.

The only one who should have it rough should be me alone!

And that was the reason for this substitution strategy.

"Kushi-chan. As a terminal of this 'Anshin'in-san', you're not a subordinate or an underling, but something like the person herself—but it's not like your actions and words are leaked to her, right? It's not like she can use telepathy to spy on all your movements and thoughts, right?"

"Eh? Um... Why do you think that?"

"Ah, well, if everyone had a perfect mutual understanding of each other, then it would be weird that you didn't know what happened to Teppou-san or Utsubogi-san, despite also being terminals."

Of course, this was an inference made on the assumption that Kushi-chan wasn't lying in her assertions, but I had to trust her on this—it would be awful if I started to doubt the person I wanted to help.

"In that case, it should be the same if I went in your place—you can just report to 'Anshin'in-san' that you were the one who went."

"...Is-is that really okay? Anshin'in-san is pretty good at seeing through things like that... It's true that not all my actions are leaked to her, but she

doesn't seem like someone who'll be deceived by that—"

"It's fine, it's fine."

That was how I obtained Kushi-chan's seal of approval during lunch—from Kushi-chan's point of view, it may have sounded like an irresponsible promise, but I had a confidence in myself that was close to absolute.

Banking on the premise that "not everything was leaked out", this was certainly an executable strategy against "Anshin'in-san"—against the gamemaster.

Because.

Even with me going and taking Kushi-chan's place in this matter—was all part of her plan.

We were all dancing on the palm of her hand.

The reason Kushi-chan had been deployed—the reason she'd been chosen for the second stage was not because she was the "Sword Dancer", but simply because she was an old friend of mine.

"Anshin'in-san" had probably changed her plans somewhere along the way—at least when the game began, she had simply chosen opponents with Kumagawa-kun being the sole player in mind.

However, after clearing the tutorial or Stage 0, and then the quest for the second stage, she turned her eyes to me—the one who had gotten close to Kumagawa-kun.

Well, it probably wasn't that she turned her eyes to me, and more that I happened to simply "enter her field of vision"—in any case, she chose to get me "involved" in this game as well.

If I were to use gaming terms.

It was like saying—"Midway participation OK!"

And so, having been forced to go up against Kumagawa-kun in this sword fight due to the circumstances, rather than calling it midway participation, it was more like me barging my way into this battle—although it wasn't like I knew games that well, so describing it like this was pretty halfhearted.

As someone who had seen with my very own eyes the fates of Teppou Uchi-san and Utsubogi Mei-san, it was obvious that I wouldn't just sit by after learning that my childhood friend, Yakeishi Kushi, was to be the guard for Stage 2.

That's why "Anshin'in-san" left it to Kushi-chan, even though she likely originally had a different terminal in mind for Stage 2's guard. Knowing that, if she did that, then I'd move to take her place.

"...Haah."

It didn't seem like Kushi-chan had guessed that far at the intentions of this "Anshin'in-san", but I'd understood—and unfortunately, even though I understood, I had no choice to play along.

It didn't have to necessarily be Kumagawa-kun, but I hated playing along with someone else's plans and hated having to do as I was told more than anything else. But if I stuck to that way of thinking here and now, then it would just be the same as letting Kushi-chan die. And the phrase "letting her die" may not even be an exaggeration.

I checked the clock.

It had already been a while since our planned meeting time had passed—if I continued to peek at the state of affairs on the rooftop like this, it would end up seeming like I was hesitating.

Although, I was hesitating.

I did feel anxious, wondering if things would really end well with me trying

to sneak around Kumagawa-kun like this—with me trying to perform a sneak attack on him like this. However, I had an equal amount of curiosity as I did hesitation.

Upon being betrayed by someone close to him.

What sort of reaction would Kumagawa-kun display?

I couldn't help but find it thrilling.

He was the one that seemed like someone who'd make betrayal a hobby, so if he was betrayed—if he was stabbed in the back, or perhaps stabbed from the side, what sort of reaction would he give? It would be a lie if I said that I wasn't interested.

And that.

Was probably what Anshin'in-san was aiming for.

"Well... Although I gotta try and make sure my betrayal isn't exposed..."

In the end, this was a game.

In terms of the game, even in spite of the fact that I had mostly been forced to participate, my clear conditions were properly—and even equally—decided for me. It was to work in place of Kushi-chan, without being exposed by Kumagawa-kun, and guide him to the third stage.

If I could do that, then I would be relieved of my duty.

Protect my childhood friend, and then betray—and then, without my mutiny being exposed to Kumagawa-kun, I'd be able to continue working as the General Affairs Manager of the Student Council Executive Committee. Although, it's not like I particularly wanted to continue working as the General Affairs Manager of the Student Council Executive Committee, but anyway.

I had my own personal objectives, after all—to maintain the peace of this

academy.

...Well, rather than just not having my identity exposed, it actually seemed harder to lose to Kumagawa-kun... If a contrarian like him found out that I'd lost on purpose, he'd probably say something like, "This doesn't count as a victory, it's practically as if I lost", after all...

Really, this Student Council President was at an age that was hard to please.

"All right! Let's go!"

When the hands of the clock reached 3:50, I decided to get moving. It was rather unladylike of me to do so, but as if this were a play, I vigorously kicked open the door with a "Bang!" and threw aside the scabbard to the "Fool's Katana", as if my intention was to lose—and I leapt straight towards Kumagawa-kun's front.

Perhaps this was just me being sentimental.

Despite being about to stab Kumagawa-kun in the back, at least in physical terms, I was about to cut him through the front.

"Kumagawa Misogi! Prepare yourself!"

[Huh. Saki-chan, what are you doing?]

Dudadadadadadadaaaaan!

Was the sound I made as I vigorously fell flat on my face. Like I was in a manga. And at that point, the "Fool's Katana" that I had carelessly let go of spun wildly as it flew towards Kumagawa-kun before impaling him in the chest.

Not even slightly off from the point where the "Hero's Sword" had impaled him just a few moments earlier.

[Guha!]

Kumagawa-kun flipped around from the impact.

As expected of a Japanese katana, it cut into things rather well without folding or bending—even without any nationalism involved, it was rather impressive that it could pierce through a person with its weight alone.

“...or rather, oh no! I ended up killing Kumagawa-kuuun!”

He, he’s all right, right?

Even in this situation, he should be able to properly use “All Fiction”—thinking that, I quickly rushed over to Kumagawa-kun.

He showed no signs of stirring as he hemorrhaged quite a lot of blood on the floor, but I was more surprised by the fact that—Kumagawa-kun had figured out my identity in a single blow.

As for what that meant—I couldn’t figure it out in that moment.

Although I was still in shock from having ended up killing Kumagawa-kun —

“Eh? Huh? Does this mean... Then, Kumagawa-kun... The game ‘Anshin’in-san’ prepared for him... He... Failed to clear Stage 2?”

As I had come to the rooftop in place of Yakeishi Kushi, faced off against Kumagawa-kun who wielded the “Hero’s Sword”, and stabbed him to death with the “Fool’s Katana”... That was what it would be. That was what it would end up being.

Wow...

Regardless of what anyone’s intentions were, this was supposed to have been a match that was rigged from the start—and, even in the midst of betrayal and treachery, he should have been able to see a glimpse of victory—Kumagawa-kun should have.

But, of all things, he’d managed to see through my true identity.

[Once again—I couldn’t win.]

Through “All Fiction”, which automatically activated after his death, Kumagawa-kun had been able to revive, despite the katana still impaled in his chest—and, speaking with a flood of emotions, he muttered the same line he always did.

Wait, but, seriously.

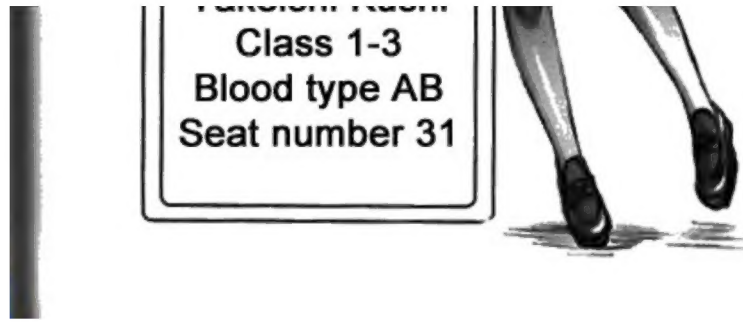
What’s going to happen after this?

Anshin'in-san's Peace of Mind Terminal Introduction ③

Yakeishi Kushi. One of my seven hundred million terminals, and a childhood friend of Sukinasaki Saki-san. Well, since I have seven hundred million, I make up about a tenth of the world's population, so most people will probably have a terminal near them—and, in most cases, with no malice or hostility. Even so, it just seems too good to be true that Sukinasaki-san, who Kumagawa-kun was treating as his “partner”, had a childhood friend that was one of my terminals. Although, it ended up being too bad for Kumagawa-kun... In any case, the reason I changed where the Anshin'in Game was heading was due to her existence. In terms of her character, it's true that she's not a combat-oriented terminal, so it seemed like she was really taken aback by my orders—well, you already know what happened as a result. She possesses a Skill even without me needing to lend her one, but it seems like she never got the chance to use it. What a shame.



Yakeishi Kushi



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